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SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS: SOMCHAI NEELAPHAIJIT UPDATE

REF: BANGKOK 00235 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: After 10 months with no significant developments, the investigation into the disappearance of Muslim human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit is again making headlines. On October 31, junta leader Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratkalin stated publicly that a close aide of ex-PM Thaksin may have been involved in the disappearance. At the same time, it appears likely that the controversial chief of the department charged with investigating the Somchai case, Police General Sombat Amornwiwat, will soon be removed from his position. As the spotlight is once again on this case, threats against Somchai's outspoken wife, Angkhana, may increase. Poloff contacted Angkhana directly to express the USG's continuing interest in this case and concern for the safety of her and her family. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On October 31, the head of the Council for National Security (CNS) Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratkalin stated that a close aide of ex-PM Thaksin may have been involved in Somchai's disappearance. Sonthi did not offer any additional details, but speculation centers around alleged records of telephone conversations between an official in the then-Prime Minister's office and one of the five police officers charged with forcing Somchai into a car on March 12, 2004. CNS secretary-general, Gen. Winai Patthiyakul later informed the

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press that the CNS will establish a separate committee to oversee the continuing investigation into this case.

¶3. (U) Meanwhile, it appears increasingly likely that the controversial head of the Ministry of Justice's Department of Special Investigations (DSI) Police General Sombat Amornwiwat will soon be transferred back to the Police Commission. DSI is in charge of the ongoing investigation into Somchai's disappearance. DSI, and Sombat in particular, have been harshly criticized by human rights organizations, Somchai's wife, and by renowned forensic pathologist Khunying Porntip Rojanasunan who heads the MOJ's Central Institute of Forensic Science for failure to make any significant progress in the case. (Note. In January 2006, after the verdict acquitting all but one of the five police officers charged with abducting Somchai (see reftel), Thaksin stated that he knew Somchai was dead and that he expected additional arrests by the end of February 2006 based on the ongoing work of DSI. Since that time, no significant developments in the investigation have been made public. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) Given the increased attention on the case, human rights organizations have expressed concern for the safety of Somchai's wife, Angkhana. Angkhana is an outspoken human rights advocate on the topic of forced disappearances and the situation in southern Thailand. Over the past two years she has reported receiving multiple death threats, harassing

telephone calls, and surveillance. On November 1, Poloff called Angkhana to express the USG's continuing interest in Somchai's case, and concern for her safety. Angkhana confirmed that she feared for her safety given the increased attention on the case, and said that she planned to remain at home for the next several days. We will continue to monitor this case closely and will remain in contact with Angkhana.

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